IMPROVED SERVICES AT SMETHWICK GALTON BRIDGE
by John Warren

The three services that stop at Smethwick Galton Bridge on the New Street to Wolverhampton line will all see improvements over the next year.

The Shrewsbury service, which is already operated using brand new Class 196 diesel multiple units, will be speeded up from June, with services only stopping at Wolverhampton, Shifnal, Telford Centre and Wellington. This will reduce the journey time to and from Shrewsbury by about 9 minutes.

The Wolverhampton to Walsall service started to be upgraded in February with the introduction of brand new Class 730 suburban electric multiple units on some journeys. These units will be introduced onto all journeys later this year.

Finally, the Birmingham to Liverpool services will also receive brand new Class 730 long distance units, with the first expected to be in service by the end of the year.

PUBLIC MEETING AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Stourbridge Line User Group Public Meeting and Annual General Meeting will take place at the Refreshment Room, Kidderminster Town (SVR) Railway Station on Tuesday 14 May 2024 at 7.15 p.m. Please note the slightly earlier start time which is necessary due to the room being closed at 9.30 p.m.

The Public Meeting is open to members and non-members. There will be presentations from Train Operating Companies and local transport authorities.

Members are reminded that their membership renewal is due and a membership form has been included with this mailing. Please note that it was decided at last year's AGM that, due to increased postage and printing costs, hardcopy membership has had to be raised from £5 to £6. On-line membership remains unaltered at £3. If you are attending the meeting, you can bring your membership form with you and pay on the night.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ ANSWERS

The answers to the Christmas Photo Quiz were as follows :-

1 – Victoria, 2 - All Creatures Great and Small, 3 – Minder, 4 - Downton Abbey, 5 – Life On Mars, 6 - Doc Martin, 7 - Peaky Blinders, 8 - The Return of Sherlock Holmes, 9 - The Saint, 10 – Gangsters, 11 - Brideshead Revisited, 12 - Cold Feet, 13 - Alias Smith and Jones, 14 – Skins, 15 - Big Deal, 16 - The Avengers, 17 - Happy Valley, 18 - Danger Man

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Platform

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ALL CHANGE IN JUNE
by Roger Davis

It is always pleasing when a SLUG campaign ends in success, and we are proud that West Midlands Railway has listened to our arguments and has responded with changes to the Stourbridge line timetable from 2 June.

Our concern, which was initiated by SLUG member Chris Perry, was that the new timetable introduced last May removed through off-peak services from Hagley and Blakedown to Worcester. SLUG built on Chris' suggestion and submitted a document which proved that the stopping pattern of services along the Stourbridge line could be changed without impacting on the reliability of the service. We are grateful to Mike Hoptroff and Warren Stephens at West Midlands Trains for taking our arguments seriously and taking action to produce the revised timetable.

Hagley [L] and Blakedown [R] will get through services to Worcester every 30 minutes from June

Members may think that this change has taken a long time to happen. However, changes to the national timetable have always been set in stone months before the timetable change date, and the timetable change in 2018 which caused major disruption to services across the country made the rail industry even more cautious. Thus, although the SLUG proposal had been agreed in principle last summer, it was too late for it to be implemented in the December 2023 timetable change.

In short, the changes will affect stations between Smethwick Galton Bridge and Kidderminster as follows :-

- All services will stop at Rowley Regis, Cradley Heath and Stourbridge Junction.
- Services to and from Kidderminster will stop at Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye.
- Services to and from Worcester will stop at Hagley and Blakedown.

Two further changes, instigated by SLUG, have also been agreed and will be implemented in June.

- On Saturday evenings, the 2116 service from Snow Hill to Worcester has been withdrawn and replaced by a new service at 2231 from Snow Hill. This means that the service from Snow Hill to Worcester will be half hourly at 2101, 2131, 2201, 2231 and 2300.
- Stourbridge Town services will be retimed to provide better connections with main line services.

Of course, this could be improved with passing loops, although the only feasible location would be close to Moor Street, ⅔ distance up the line, and the additional cost would only improve the frequency to every 25 minutes. This level of service is not attractive to potential passengers.

A freight to Round Oak between Kingswinford Junction and Moor Street

At the end of 2023, Dudley Council published its local plan which identified five priority sites for new housing - two in Brierley Hill (900 houses), two in Dudley Town Centre (360 houses) and one at Ketley Quarry, Kingswinford (650 houses). The first four sites are conveniently sited very close to the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro line. However, the Ketley Quarry site is close to two main roads (to Dudley and Stourbridge) which suffer from chronic congestion, is poorly served by six local bus routes which operate at best every 30 minutes and at worst not at all, and is a long way from rail based services with Stourbridge Town and Junction over 4 miles away and the Pedmore Road Metro stop 2¼ miles away along the aforementioned congested roads. All the local plan states is that the Black Country Rapid Transit Study of 2016 concluded that full delivery of the Public Transport Spine would best be achieved by completing the Stourbridge to Walsall corridor as a tram-based facility, preferably tram-train. It also notes that the old Pensnett railway branch is only 0.3 miles from the site but treats it as part of a nature reserve rather than a possible rail based solution to keep additional cars off the already congested roads. However, reopening this line is dependant on the reopening of Stourbridge to Brierley Hill. It appears that Dudley Councillors and MPs are just paying lip service to the possibility of new rail based services rather than actively promoting them. Their attitude was summed up when SLUG sent them its discussion paper on options for the corridor. Horatio Nelson could have counted the number of replies on his right hand.

Tyne and Wear Metro now shares a section of track with freight services. SLUG believes that the same could be achieved if tram-trains were introduced on the Stourbridge Junction to Brierley Hill line, thus providing a through service to Dudley and beyond at a frequency that passengers would find attractive. These objectives must be achieved to reduce road traffic in the area and ease congestion

SLUG has held face to face meetings with Transport for West Midlands and the West Midlands Rail Executive and has spoken to Andy Street. Consultants are currently considering options for the line and should produce their final report by the end of the year. SLUG's options paper has been submitted by TfWM and WMRE to this consultation. We await the findings with interest.

The Pensnett branch close to Ketley Quarry

DASHER - WHITE KNIGHT OR WHITE ELEPHANT?
by John Warren

It appears that hardly a week goes by wiithout one of our local MPs using a photo opportunity to promote the “Stourbridge Dasher” shuttle service from Stourbridge Junction to “Brierley Hill”. As a result, SLUG has been asked why it has not actively joined the campaign to introduce this service.

Class 398 Tram-Trains at Taff Wells depot prior to introduction onto Cardiff Valley Lines services

(Transport for Wales)

SLUG believes that the gap between the national network at Stourbridge Junction and the West Midlands Metro at Harts Hill (Canal Street) should be bridged as soon as possible given the chronic road congestion between Stourbridge and Brierley Hill. However, it would only support the Stourbridge Dasher proposal if it was the only option left on the table. SLUG feels that passengers wishing to travel from Worcestershire to Black Country destinations such as Dudley and Wolverhampton would not find the rail option attractive if they were forced to use three different modes of transport – heavy rail, light rail and Metro – to reach their destination. What is needed is a service that integrates with the West Midlands Metro line from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill, either by using tram-trains which could operate over the Metro network or by extending the Metro line to Stourbridge.

However, SLUG is concerned at some aspects of the Stourbridge Dasher proposal. It claims to serve Brierley Hill although the closest the line gets to Brierley Hill town centre is over ⅓ mile with an uphill walk. Connection with the Midland Metro is proposed at Canal Street. However, this would incur extra costs for the Metro extension to Brierley Hill as the provisional Metro stop at Canal Street has been removed from the final proposals. Even if the stop was provided, it would mean passengers having to cross the freight line to change services as the headshunt for the freight line extends to Pedmore Road. Finally, the stop at Canal Street is at the end of a narrow lane and surrounded by industrial dereliction, meaning that waiting for a connecting service would be in an intimidating environment, especially in the dark.

If the Stourbridge Dasher proposal went ahead, it would have to use the down line (i.e. the line towards Dudley) with the freight service using the up line. Fencing would need to be installed along the line to segregate the two tracks. The proposal is for five intermediate stops to be provided at Corbett Outpatient Centre, Brettell Lane, Moor Street, Station Road and Waterfront. Given that the maximum speed permitted for a light rail service is 25 miles per hour and that the distance between Stourbridge Junction and Canal Street is 3.6 miles, a single journey would probably take about 17 minutes. Thus, allowing for recovery time at each end, the best that could be achieved is a service every 40 minutes.

These changes will mean that departure times at stations between Smethwick Galton Bridge and Kidderminster will change. The pattern for a typical off-peak hour will be as follows :-

Worcester Foregate Street		40	....	15	....
Worcester Shrub Hill	arr	42	....	....	....
Worcester Shrub Hill	dep	47	....	....	....
Droitwich Spa		57	....	24	....
Hartlebury		▼	....	31	....
Kidderminster	arr	06	....	36	....
Kidderminster	dep	07	22	37	52
Blakedown		12	▼	42	▼
Hagley		15	▼	45	▼
Stourbridge Junction	arr	19	29	49	59
Stourbridge Junction	dep	20	30	50	00
Lye		▼	34	▼	04
Cradley Heath		25	37	55	07
Old Hill		▼	41	▼	11
Rowley Regis		31	44	01	14
Langley Green		▼	48	▼	18
Smethwick Galton Bridge		36	51	06	21
The Hawthorns		38	53	08	23
Jewellery Quarter		42	57	12	27
Birmingham Snow Hill	arr	46	01	16	31

Birmingham Snow Hill	dep	01	16	31	46
Jewellery Quarter		04	19	34	49
The Hawthorns		08	23	38	53
Smethwick Galton Bridge		11	26	41	56
Langley Green		▼	29	▼	59
Rowley Regis		16	33	46	03
Old Hill		▼	36	▼	06
Cradley Heath		22	39	52	09
Lye		▼	42	▼	12
Stourbridge Junction	arr	27	46	57	16
Stourbridge Junction	dep	27	47	57	17
Hagley		31	▼	01	▼
Blakedown		34	▼	04	▼
Kidderminster	arr	39	55	09	25
Kidderminster	dep	39	....	09	....
Hartlebury		44	....	▼	....
Droitwich Spa		53	....	21	....
Worcester Shrub Hill	arr	....	....	28	....
Worcester Shrub Hill	dep	....	....	33	....
Worcester Foregate Street		02	....	35	....

The SLUG website has been updated and a pdf copy of the full timetable will be sent out to all SLUG members with email addresses before the start of June.

Unfortunately, two other changes requested by SLUG have not made it into the June timetable change, although West Midlands Railway has agreed to keep the suggestions on the table. As both of these issues involve services at Worcester, SLUG will be seeking support from the Worcestershire Rail User Group Association and Worcestershire County Council.

The first involves the last train from Worcester on Saturday evenings which used to be at 2244, but has been changed to 2212. SLUG believes that this is too early and discourages rail travellers from visiting Worcester for an evening out.

The other is the termination of two Monday to Friday services from the Stourbridge line at Shrub Hill rather than at Foregate Street. SLUG believes that these services (at 1028 and 1501) should continue to, and restart from, Foregate Street as this will provide better connections with GWR services to/from London and Bristol and is far more convenient for people visiting the City Centre and its attractions.

Worcester Shrub Hill

SLUG will continue to engage with West Midlands Railway to attempt to get these changes implemented.

AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY
by John Warren

The rail industry is in limbo with little to demonstrate to long-suffering passengers that things are going to improve quickly.

The first issue is the current industrial unrest. It means that rail passengers wishing to enjoy a few days away from home are loath to book accommodation in advance in case fourteen days' notice of industrial action is given, causing a complete cancellation of train services on the intended day of travel. Thankfully, the RMT has settled its dispute and no strike action is imminent, but ASLEF received a mandate from its members on 14 February for another six months of strike action. This causes far greater disruption as it results in all services being cancelled on the day of all-out strike, and significant disruption over the period when an overtime ban is in force.

SLUG is not taking sides in this dispute, but it is noticeable that industrial action is only taking place at operating companies micro-managed by the Department for Transport and that national newspapers report that Mark Harper, the Secretary of State for Transport, is intransigent in refusing to talk to the union to try to find the compromise solution that would benefit rail passengers. This is the same Mark Harper who attempted to close all booking offices, and turned HS2 into a high speed branch line while diverting the majority of the savings onto road projects.

Great British Railways

The second issue is the influence of the Department for Transport (DfT). Mr Harper did raise his head above the parapet in February to allegedly address this when he introduced the draft Rail Reform Bill to implement changes recommended in 2018 by Keith Williams and belatedly published as a White Paper in 2021. Since then, the DfT has dragged its feet until announcing the draft bill. Unfortunately, there is hardly any chance of the word "draft" being removed and the bill going through the parliamentary process and receiving royal assent before the end of this parliamentary session, and thus before the General Election. Therefore the current situation is that the Labour Party seems loath to unveil its proposed structure for the railways, while the Tories seem determined to delay the implementation of Keith Williams' proposals. This means that the railways will continue to be in limbo until a future Secretary of State takes decisive action.

The British travelling public deserves a reliable railway run by rail professionals, remote from the DfT, and free from confrontation between management and unions. At present, this seems a pipe dream and needs to be sorted out as a matter of urgency. Rail passengers, fed up with the current lack of action, deserve better.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Two Stations in one! The Malvern Radar and Technology History Society (MRATHS) has concluded a deal with West Midlands Trains which will allow it to lease part of Great Malvern station building to house equipment and exhibits in a "Technology Station". This will be a unique opportunity to showcase Malvern's scientific history within the railway station environment and has strong potential to bring new visitors to the town. *(Source: WCRP)*

The canopies at Great Malvern have been beautifully restored recently *(Network Rail)*

Wisely Funding Tyseley. Train operator, West Midlands Trains has secured £50m investment from Angel Trains for the development of Tyseley rail depot, one of three locations where Stourbridge Line rolling stock is stabled. The capital will be used to enhance the facility for maintaining the TOC's new local fleet. *(Source: Modern Railways)*

On Tap. A pilot scheme next year will see "Tap and Go" card reading equipment fitted at twelve Stourbridge Line stations to test the addition of rail travel to the existing bus and Metro purchase options on the "Swift" card payment scheme. The enhanced card will offer similar benefits to the TfL "Oyster" card which caps fares according to usage and offers the best value tickets from the numerous operators. SLUG welcomes the new initiative which will simplify multi-modal travel but is wary that the issue of ticket office closures might resurface. *(Source: www.gov.uk)*

Another People Mover. Two companies, Doppelmayr Cable Car UK and (French group) Poma, are in the running to be awarded a £269m contract to design, build and operate the planned Automated People Mover (APM) in Solihull district. The 1.4 mile track will connect Birmingham Interchange station on the HS2 line with the NEC campus, Birmingham International station and the airport. An optimum frequency of every three minutes for a journey time of six minutes, will mean that the cars will be capable of carrying 2,100 passengers per hour in each direction. *(Source: Business Live)*

Interruption to Service. From Saturday 23 March to Tuesday 9 April, Midland Metro services will only run from Wednesbury Parkway to Wolverhampton Station while a new delta junction, officially named Tipton Junction, is built to enable through services from Dudley to either Wolverhampton or Birmingham. This will be followed by six weeks' work at Dudley Street Guns Village, although work will take place outside of service where possible. Alternative transport and revised timetable information is available at www.tfwm.org.uk. *(Source: Midland Metro Alliance)*